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ABSTRACT

A sample population of students from seventh grade through college, seen as a special audience rather than a mass of autonomous individuals, responded to the question: "If you got conflicting reports of the same news story from radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and other people, which one of these sources would you be most inclined to believe?" Results show that television is the most credible medium followed by magazines, newspapers, other people, and radio within the sample of 405 subjects. This research improves on existing work by providing a recent view of student perceptions of media credibility, comparative media credibility among students, and increased response options (adding the categories of "magazines" and "other people"). Also, no significant differences were found between male and female responses. (CH)

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HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF MEDIA CREDIBILITY

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Researchers are with increasing frequency rejecting the view of the audience as a mass of autonomous individuals and viewing it instead as the sum of numerous reference groups or so-called special audiences. As Freidson (1971) suggests, "To the extent that past research has studied the audience as if it were composed of discrete individuals...(it) has rested on an inaccurate foundation and suffers because of it." The student audience is one such special audience.

It was the purpose of this study to consider perceptions of media credibility among the student population from the seventh grade through college.

Credibility of the media has been defined in several ways. Deutschmann and Kiel (1960) factor-analyzed the concept into five dimensions: responsibility, potency, pleasant-veracity, informative-vitality, and entertainment. Jacobson (1969) factor-analyzed media credibility into two dimensions: authenticity and objectivity. Most of the studies, however, are concerned with only one aspect of media credibility -- believability. The present study uses the most frequently used operational aspect of the believability dimension: believability in the face of conflicting news reports.

Several studies concerning demographic correlates of media credibility among the general population are of relevance to this study of the student population. For example, Carter and Greenberg (1965), Greenberg (1966), and Westley and Severin (1964) found that more females than males tended to believe television over other mass media, while the reverse was true with regard to newspapers. Carter and Greenberg (1965), Roper Associates (1967), Greenberg (1966), and

Westley and Severin (1964) found that although all educational groups believe television most over other media, the less educated are more likely than the better educated to believe television. Carter and Greenberg (1965), Greenberg (1966), and Westley and Severin (1964) found with reference to age, all groups favor television over other media, but there is a tendency for age to be inversely related to belief in television.

Three previous research efforts have directly investigated media credibility among students. Schramm (1945) asked a sample of 300 college students to respond to the question: "Which do you consider more reliable as a source of news -- radio or newspapers?" Results indicated radio to be more reliable than newspapers. For all practical purposes, the study was conducted before the availability of television. Markham and Ranck (1959) asked a random sample of 326 university students to evaluate television, radio, newspapers, and magazines on the basis of accuracy or trustworthiness. Magazines r nked first, followed by newspapers. Bishop, Boersma, and Williams (1969) asked 80 high school students how they thought the mass media represented governmental efforts in Vietnam and on racial problems. Results revealed a low level of belief in media coverage of these two issues. The study limited its investigation to the media as a whole and did not offer comparisons among the various mass media.

Despite the research reported on media credibility, most of the studies fail to offer sufficient alternatives for respondent selection. For example, most of the media credibility studies fail to offer magazines as a choice. Furthermore, none of the studies have provided the category of "other people" as a possible alternative response.

The purpose of the research reported in this paper is to provide 1) a more recent view of student perceptions of media credibility, 2) comparative media

credibility among high school and college students, and 3) results obtained by expanding the number of response options to include the categories of "magazines" and "other people."

Procedure

The authors interviewed subjects selected at random from a university student population (N = 200) and a Jr. - Sr. high school population (N = 205). After pre-testing a preliminary interview schedule prior to the actual study, the final validated interview schedule consisted of the following:

(1) Determination of sex and age or year in school

(2) Response to the question: "If you got conflicting or different reports of the same news story from radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and other people, which one of these five sources would you be most inclined to believe--overall?"

Possible responses were randomized, thus eliminating order effect. Where appropriate, a chi square analysis was performed to test levels of significant difference between groups and between different media.

Results

Table 1 indicates the frequency of responses for the total sample. Results show television to be the most credible medium followed by magazines, newspapers, other people, and radio. Tables 2 and 3 provide total frequency data for the high school and college samples, respectively. The high school and college

data both show the ranking of the media to be the same as the ranking reported for the total sample. An overall statistical comparison of the high school and college samples reveals no significant differences between the two educational groups as indicated by Table 4.

Tables 5 and 6 provide frequency data for age/year in school of the high school and college samples, respectively. Table 5 reveals few differences on the basis of age in the high school sample. Table 6 similarily reveals no major differential responses on the basis of year in school for the college sample.

Table 7 provides frequency data by sex for the combined samples. No significant differences were found between the male and female population. Tables 8 and 9 provide frequency data by sex of the high school and college samples, respectively. Like the total sample, no significant differences were found between males and females.

Discussion

The findings of this 1972 study fail to support the college studies by Schramm (1945) and Markham and Ranck (1959). Unlike Schramm's findings, radio ranks lowest in credibility among the college students. Like the findings of Markham and Ranck, magazines do differ somewhat from newspapers, but television is more credible than both of these print media. The overriding belief in television is possibly attributable to the fact that the college sample of this study has had television exposure since birth while the college sample of 1959 and 1945 had received television exposure at later stages of development (if at all in the case of 1945 students).

Since the credibility study of the high school population by Bishop et al. did not investigate the comparative credibility of the media, direct comparisons

between that study and the research presented here are difficult to determine. Nonetheless, the fact that the relative credibility of the media (in comparison to other people) is generally so great, suggests that 1972 high school students have a higher level of belief in the media than Bishop et al. suggested.

Consistent with the more recent studies of the adult population, the total student sample most believes television, followed by a print medium.

"Other people" ranks rather low in terms of credibility for the total sample. If indeed the two-step flow theory is a correct appraisal of information diffusion, then it is perhaps of interest to note that this study suggests that the student audience perceives this interpersonal choice as having little credibility in the face of conflicting news reports. Such a conclusion is contrary to the suggestion (Katz, 1957) that interpersonal interaction legitimizes mass media information. The tendency for the high school sample to rank "other people" higher than the ranking among college students, is perhaps due to the high peer orientation evident in the adolescent population. However, this tendency is insufficient to result in significant differences between the high school and college samples.

The findings of this study are inconsistent with those studies linking educational level with media credibility. Results indicate no significant difference between the college and Jr.-Sr. high school samples, in terms of gross level of education. Further, results suggest no noticeable differences within the high school sample and within the college sample. The latter two comparisons are perhaps too discriminating to expect significant educational differences. But the gross comparison -- between high school and college -- did not yield significant differences, either. Possibly other shared characteristics of the high school and college populations serve to overcome differences in educational level -- e.g., student status and experiences, or a "television generation" syndrome.

The study is not consistent with the differential responses on the basis of age found in previous studies. If one considers the college sample older than the high school sample, then results suggest no significant differences on the basis of age. Again, perhaps such age distinctions are too discriminating to yield differential responses. The high school and college samples combined may constitute a single youth culture.

The study is not consistent with the differential responses on the basis of sex found in previous research. Perhaps other characteristics of the student population -- e.g., high peer orientation, or changing attitudes toward sex roles -- may negate any possible sex differences found in the adult population.

Additional research with the student population would prove useful. Media credibility data should be collected from students below the seventh grade level. It would perhaps be useful in future research to distinguish school or campus, local, and national-international levels of news. Further research should consider additional demographic variables in the student population--on- or off-campus residence for college students or IQ or career (college) plans for pre-college students.

As today's student population becomes the adult non-student population of tomorrow, longitudinal research will be necessary to determine if perceptions of media credibility are a function of the student environment. Credibility perceptions should be applied to non-news aspects of the media message. Are product advertisements more credible on one medium as opposed to others? Information diffusion research in the student population is necessary to determine under what circumstances the two-step flow is operative and under what circumstances inter-personal interaction legitimizes media messages and vice versa. The student population constitutes a significant portion of today's society. Further research

is necessary to provide insights into its perceptions of media credibility, which in turn may be useful in determining how the attitudinal and value structures of the student are shaped and changed.

APPENDIX

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TABLE 1

Total Frequency Data of Student Perceptions of Media Credibility

Total	TV	Magazines	Newspapers	Other People	Radio
N=405	159	90	71	51	34

Chi Square Analysis:	df	X^2
One Sample Test	4	115.72***

*p .05
**p .01
***p < .001

TABLE 2

Frequency Data of Jr. and Sr. High School Student Perceptions of Media Credibility

Total	TV	Magazines	Newspapers	Other People	Radio
N = 205	83	38	38	30	16

Chi Square Analysis:	df	X^2
One Sample Test	4	61.65***

*p .05
**p .01
***p $\leq$ .001

TABLE 3

Total Frequency Data of College Student Perceptions of Media Credibility

Total	TV	Magazines	Newspapers	Other People	Radio
N = 200	76	52	33	21	18

Chi Square Analysis:	df	X^2
One Sample Test	4	58.35***

*p .05
**p .01
***p < .001

TABLE 4

Total Frequency Data by Major Level of Education of College and Jr.-Sr. High School Student Perceptions of Media Credibility

Jr.-Sr. High School	TV	Magazines	Newspapers	Other People	Radio
N = 205	83	38	38	30	16
College					
N = 200	76	52	33	21	18

Chi Square Analysis:	df	X^2
Comparison	4	4.50
College vs. High School		

*p .05
**p .01

TABLE 5

Frequency Data by Age of Jr. and Sr. High School Student Perceptions of Media Credibility

	TV	Magazines	Newspapers	Other People	Radio
Age 12 N = 21	8	1	6	4	2
Age 13 N = 32	13	3	5	8	3
Age 14 N = 42	18	8	7	4	5
Age 15 N = 30	9	6	5	6	4
Age 16 N = 35	13	13	4	3	2
Age 17 N = 25	14	4	6	1	0
Age 18 N = 20	8	3	5	4	0

TABLE 6

Frequency Data by Year in School of College Student Perceptions of Media Credibility

	TV	Magazines	Newspapers	Other People	Radio
Freshmen N = 45	21	9	7	4	4
Sophomores N = 31	12	8	4	3	4
Juniors N = 37	13	9	9	3	3
Seniors N = 44	17	17	4	3	3
Grads. N = 43	13	9	9	8	4

TABLE 7

Total Frequency Data by Sex of College and Jr.-Sr. High School Student Perceptions of Media Credibility

	TV	Magazines	Newspapers	Other People	Radio
Female N = 181	69	36	37	20	19
Male N = 224	90	54	34	31	15

Chi Square Analysis:

Comparison	df	X^2
Male vs. Female	4	4.84

*p .05
*p .01

TABLE 8

Frequency Data by Sex of Jr. and Sr. High School

Student Perceptions of Media Credibility

	TV	Magazines	Newspapers	Other People	Radio
Female N = 98	40	16	19	13	10
Male N = 107	43	22	19	17	6

Chi Square Analysis:

Comparison	df	χ^2
Male vs. Female	4	1.259 (Yates)

*p .05
*p .01

TABLE 9

Frequency Data by Sex of College Student

Perceptions of Media Credibility

	TV	Magazines	Newspapers	Other People	Radio
Female N = 83	29	20	18	7	9
Male N = 117	47	32	15	14	9

Chi Square Analysis:

Comparison	df	X^2
Male vs. Female	4	2.657 (Yates)

*p .05
**p .01